DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 517 SO 030 966

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TITLE Educating Urban Youth: James Conant and the Changing Context of Metropolitan America, 1945-1995.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Adolescents; *Comprehensive Programs; Consolidated Schools; Economic Factors; *Educational History; Educational Philosophy; Educational Sociology; *High Schools; Racial Factors; *School Culture; *Social Change; *Student Needs; Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS Comprehensive Education Process; *Conant (James Bryant); Historical Background

ABSTRACT

James Bryant Conant issued his famous report, "The American High School Today," in 1959, giving voice to a clear and influential reaffirmation of the comprehensive secondary school. Conant's vision in this, and in another work, "Slums and Suburbs" (1961) makes an interesting point of departure for consideration of the forces that have shaped the U.S. high school in the latter half of the 20th century. This paper discusses Conant's ideas and addresses just how these ideas have been treated by history. First the paper provides the historical context of the post World War II United States, and then it examines in depth the questions of race and the comprehensive high school; the rise of a youth culture; and high schools, youth, and the changing urban economy. The paper assesses how the changing social and economic context of postwar U.S. society changed the prospects for success of the comprehensive high school. It concludes that a number of historical developments converged in the decades following the Second World War to make James Conant's vision of the high school problematic, at least in the nation's large metropolitan areas. It also questions what the best institutional arrangement is for the great variety of U.S. youth to be educated in the coming century. Contains 4 tables of achievement, enrollment data, and 85 references. (BT)

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by John L. Rury

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Educating Urban Youth:

James Conant and the Changing Context of Metropolitan America, 1945-1995

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James Bryant Conant issued his famous report, *The American High School Today*, in 1959, giving voice to a clear and influential reaffirmation of the comprehensive secondary school. Just two years later he published another study, perhaps less influential, in *Slums and Suburbs* (1961). The first of these books was about the nation as a whole; the second focused on the country's major metropolitan areas. Conant's vision in these two works makes an interesting point of departure for consideration of the forces that have shaped the American high school in the latter half of the twentieth century. The question such a treatment raises is whether the comprehensive high school is possible—or even desirable—in a society as divided by race, social class and culture as the United States is today. This is particularly true when one examines secondary education in metropolitan America, where about eighty percent of American youth live and learn at the end of the twentieth century. (Fox, 1985; Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992)

The comprehensive high school, as defined by the Cardinal Principles Report of 1918, was premised on the idea of the common school (Hampel, 1986; Krug, 1972). This was a point that impressed Conant particularly. Even as they were differentiated into various courses of study, the students would be bound together in a common core of subject areas, and in the social and cultural life of the high school as an institution (Conant, 1959). As historians have noted, the comprehensive high school became a model for school districts across the country, including those in large cities (Cremin, 1961; Herbst, 1996). This was a break with the past, which had been characterized by specialization in secondary education. One might say that the vocationalism of the Progressive era was replaced by the democratic ethos of the comprehensive high school (Krug, 1972).

The comprehensive high school also was rooted in the principle of curricular differentiation. This too was appealing to Conant, and to other devotees of all-inclusive secondary education. At the same time that it would prepare the most academically gifted students, the high school would also provide vocational training for those destined to menial careers. Conant favored ability grouping within subjects over forming explicit "tracks" to distinguish these groups of students, and argued that some subjects—such as civics—ought to be taught in common. But these could be little doubt that the comprehensive high school was supposed to separate students along curricular lines, in accordance with what educational leaders expected to be their eventual occupational roles in society (Conant 1959). This might be described, in historical terms, as a legacy of social efficiency (Kliebard, 1995).

A final theme in Conant's vision, linked to the first two, was school size. Conant did not believe that small high schools could produce high academic standards, or that they could enroll enough

students to provide differentiated curricular options. As a consequence, Conant was an enthusiastic proponent of school consolidation, particularly in rural areas where small schools were most commonplace. He felt that large high schools, with a thousand or more students, provided the diversity necessary for academic specialization and for building the inclusive democratic ethos of the comprehensive high school ideal (Conant, 1959). For Conant and his supporters, there was never any doubt that bigger was better.

These were the principal features of the comprehensive high school, as offered by Conant, and adopted by school districts across the country. The question I propose to address is just how these ideas have been treated by history.

Historical Context

Conant wrote about secondary education during a time of profound changes in American life, and in the nation's secondary schools. This was especially true in major metropolitan areas. And it is against the backdrop of change that the implications of Conant's work can be best understood. I believe three major trends in the post-war period had a major impact on the American high school, making Conant's vision problematic. The first of these was the changing racial and ethnic composition of the nation's principal metropolitan areas. With the migration of millions of poorly educated African Americans to the North during the late forties, 1950's and sixties, public schools systems became differentiated along racial lines. Growing inequalities in the type and quality of education came to characterize metropolitan life (Kantor and Brenzel, 1993). If Conant and others believed that one purpose of the comprehensive high school was to bring students from different backgrounds—and with differing social destinations—together, the process of racial and social/economic differentiation made it less tenable as time passed (something Conant himself came to recognize in time) (Conant, 1961).

A second major development was the appearance of a vibrant, pervasive and commercially expansive youth culture in the post-war period. This partly was a consequence of numbers, particularly the large "baby boom" cohort of the 1950's and sixties (Hawes and Hiner, 1985). It also was a result of the evolution of courtship practices, especially what John Modell has described as the rise of the date as a central institution of adolescent life (Modell, 1989). With growing high school attendance in the 1950's and sixties, followed by rising college enrollments, educational institutions became the location in which these emerging forms of adolescent culture could develop most rapidly (Coleman, 1964). This may have been abetted, of course, by the push for ever larger comprehensive high schools that Conant and his allies made a major agenda item. In doing this, they unwittingly may have made educators' jobs even more difficult.

Finally, there was the evolution of the American economy in the post-war period, particularly the changing sectoral distribution of the occupational structure, and rising educational requirements for different types of jobs. As the number of jobs requiring a high school education of less declined, particularly in the years following 1980, rates of college enrollments began to increase significantly. American employers raised their educational expectations, and so did students (Buchman, 1989). The result was that the vocational educational options that Conant and other proponents of the comprehensive high school believed would serve a majority of American high

school students were increasingly irrelevant to the demands of the job market. By the latter 1980's a majority of high school graduates were entering college, and the differentiated curriculum of the comprehensive high school was increasingly irrelevant to their interests (Murphy and Welch, 1989).

In three sections of the paper that follow I examine each of these issues in greater depth. At the end I return to assessing how the changing social and economic context of post war American society changed the prospects for success of the comprehensive high school.

Race and the Comprehensive High School

Conant's 1959 report, which reaffirmed the ideal of the comprehensive high school, did not address the question of race. And in the years following publication of the Conant Report, race became the over-riding issue in the nation's principal urban school districts. Race came to affect the spatial organization of cities in ways that other facets of social organization had not. Blacks were highly segregated from whites, a feature of urban life that was enforced with violence, as well as with legal and quasi-legal action (Massey and Denton, 1993). Educational resources, of course, were also spatially distributed, a point Conant recognized in writing Slums and Suburbs. This, as he acknowledged, posed perhaps the greatest challenge to the comprehensive high school, as a fundamental institution of American civilization.

Much of this, of course, is well known. World War II had barely ended when a grand migration to suburbia began in most of the nation's largest cities. Pressured by severe housing shortages in the central cities, and encouraged by public policies that stimulated road building and guaranteed cheap private transportation, Americans began flocking to newly opened developments on the fringes of the urban core areas. Between 1940 and 1960, the country's suburban population grew by some 27 million, or more than twice the numerical increase in the population of central cities during the same period. As a result, the share of metropolitan area population living in central cities dropped from nearly 63 percent in 1940, to 59 percent in 1950, and to 51 percent in 1960. The decline continued thereafter, and by 1980 only 40 percent of the country's metropolitan area population lived in central cities, with the rest in surrounding suburbs (Fox, 1985; Jackson, 1985; Teaford, 1990).

Migrants from central cities were disproportionately young, middle class, and upwardly mobile. The availability of Veterans Administration (VA) and Federal Housing Authority (FHA) loans in the decades immediately following the Second World War, along with housing shortages in central cities, made the suburbs especially attractive to new families. The expanding economy provided a stable source of employment, particularly in downtown office complexes but also in rapidly developing suburban retail and manufacturing centers. These families could afford to buy housing in the suburbs, and held jobs that allowed them to spend the time and incur the costs involved in daily commuting. A post-war "marriage boom" added more than ten million new households within a decade. And the "baby boom" made relatively cheap homes in suburban subdivisions difficult to resist. (Palen, 1992; Fox 1985).

Suburban migrants were also overwhelmingly white. By 1960, when suburban population exceeded that of the central cities, less than five percent of suburbanites were African American.

(Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992) Thirty years later they were less than ten percent, and were largely segregated in separate suburban communities. This was partly because of subtle but effective practices of discrimination that discouraged Blacks from buying homes in suburban areas. As a group, whites were allowed to move into these new burgeoning, affluent communities on the edge of the expanding metropolitan area. And as they moved to suburbia, the populations of the country's central cities became older, poorer, and darker. (Massey and Denton, 1993; Teaford, 1990; Jackson, 1985)

The proportion of central city population that is white has diminished each decade since 1950, falling from more than eighty percent to about a third in the 1990s. While the Black population increased rapidly in the 1950's and sixties, leveling off at about a third of central city residents, the number of Hispanics has increased significantly since the 1970s. As William Julius Wilson has noted, poverty levels have increased significantly among all groups of city residents in the closing decades of the twentieth century, but particularly among Blacks. Whereas some eleven percent of central city residents were poor in the mid seventies, and eighteen percent of central city Blacks, by 1990 the figures had jumped to almost twenty percent and 34 percent respectively. (Wilson, 1987; Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992)

It was the early stages of this process of change that Conant confronted at the end of the 1950s. The decades following WWII witnessed a profound transformation of American metropolitan areas, creating a new cultural geography defined by race and income. This had a dramatic effect on many aspects of life in the nation's major metropolitan areas. It meant that for large numbers of urban and suburban residents there were few shared public spaces and social experiences. Stereotypical images fostered by the development of mass media created an atmosphere of mistrust and fear (Fox, 1985). And one area where this process had an almost immediate impact was public education.

Beginning in the fifties, questions of equity in Black and White schooling became major policy issues facing urban school districts. In the nation's urban high schools, the question of race came to be a source of great dissention, a point of differentiation that defined the institution in new ways. The 1954 Brown decision helped to put schools at the very center of the emerging national civil rights movement. In large metropolitan areas this led to conflict over desegregation and equality, initially in the South but eventually in other regions also (Hochschild, 1985). In the major urban areas, the impact of these issues was decisive.

In the following decade these conflicts escalated, as the Black population of urban school districts approached a majority, particularly in large northern cities. Despite protests, schools remained highly segregated, closely mirroring patterns of residential segregation in urban areas (Orfield, et. al. , 1996; Rury, 1999). This was clearly evident in secondary education. Table one provides data on the racial composition of high schools in Chicago in 1963, along with a variety of other school characteristics (Havighurst, 1964). In all but four schools, the student body is nearly ninety percent or more Black or White, despite the fact that the district's population was almost evenly divided between these groups. The vast majority of predominantly Black schools, moreover, reported low achievement scores and high drop-out rates. This pattern was evident in other large cities in this period. (Harrison, 1972) The movement of Blacks into northern urban

school districts was marked by high levels of segregation—or racial isolation—and big Black-White differences in educational outcomes (Mirel, 1993; Stolee, 1993; Wells and Crain, 1997). It was a situation that did not bode well for Conant's vision of the comprehensive high school.

This, of course, is what led Conant to write Slums and Suburbs. He was not a proponent of desegregation, and when he visited Chicago to collect data for the American High School Today he did not publish school-level statistics to avoid the question of racial inequities. (Hampel, 1986) The differences Conant observed in writing Slums and Suburbs, however, gave him pause in advocating the comprehensive high school as a model for big city school districts. Yet he had no answer to the dilemma posed by the disparities in educational and social resources on either side of the urban-suburban divide. And the differences would grow more stark in the years to come (Wells and Crain, 1997; Kozol, 1991). In Chicago, non-Hispanic Whites were less than twenty percent of the student body by 1980, and in 1990 they were barely a tenth. This made meaningful integration, particularly in the system's sixty large high schools, a virtual impossibility (Kleppner, 1984; Chicago Assembly, 1998). The ideal of the comprehensive high school functioning as a microcosm of American society was inconceivable in these circumstances.

The story elsewhere was similar. By the time the 1971 Keyes decision opened the door to federally mandated desegregation in Northern and Western urban school districts, the term "white flight" had already become a part of the national vocabulary. The Millikan I decision just two years later foreclosed the possibility of legally mandated desegregation plans across urban-suburban district lines. And as a result, the racial profile of schools on either side of the big city district lines became increasingly stark. By the 1980's a small minority of urban public school students were White, and an even smaller—though growing—portion of suburban students were Black. (Orfield, et. al. 1996) In the meantime, the portion of the nation's population living outside metropolitan areas continued to decline. (Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992) If Conant had hoped that schools in non-metropolitan communities would provide the model for others to follow, this became less tenable with time.

These changes had a particularly big impact on the culture of American high schools. As secondary education in major metropolitan areas became characterized by a sharp pattern of racial segregation, it was closely associated in the public mind with perceptions about the quality of education. (Wells and Crain, 1997) This was evident in the early 1960's in large northern cities, and became ever more pronounced as the desegregation struggles in public education reached a peak in the 1970's (Orfield, 1978; Hochschild, 1985). Of course, Conant had examined extant patterns of segregation in Slums and Suburbs, but the differences between urban and suburban high schools grew more striking in the decades that followed. By the end of the 1980's there were relatively few public high schools in large cities with a significant number of white students, and few schools that could be classified as academically excellent. (Bettis, 1996; Mora, 1997; Sexton and Nickel, 1992) In short, urban and suburban school districts became ever more disparate in the years following the protracted struggle over desegregation. (Stone, 1998)

In the four decades since Conant wrote *The American High School Today*, the common school experience in secondary education appears to have become increasingly elusive. Residential

segregation, which has changed little with the growth of large minority populations in American cities, has led to even less heterogeneity in many high schools' student bodies. (Rumberger and Willms, 1992) As metropolitan areas have grown in size and complexity, these patterns of differentiation have maintained their salience. If the comprehensive high school was supposed to bring students from different backgrounds together, it certainly has not succeeded in accomplishing this in the nation's major metropolitan areas, at least as concerns the questions of race and social class. (Mora, 1997; Wells and Crain, 1997) In this respect, and in these settings, Conant's vision certainly has not been fulfilled.

The Rise of a Youth Culture

Conant was concerned about school size, but the high schools in American cities had been large and socially diverse for a long time. (Angus and Mirel, 1999; Haubrich, 1993) Even in cases of schools that were not comprehensive, but specialized in vocational subjects, commercial studies, the arts or some other area, urban high schools were large by national standards. They also tended to be somewhat culturally variegated. They were inevitably affected by the development of the city, however, and the spatial arrangement of various population groups. As a consequence, there was a tendency for high schools in the larger cities, where social differentiation was most pronounced in the city itself, to result in social differentiated high schools. This was evident in the Chicago data discussed above. (Havighurst, 1964). While the comprehensive high school existed as an ideal for Conant, in that case, there is considerable question about whether it functioned as a tool of social integration for most of society. Conant himself estimated that only about forty percent of American high schools fit the comprehensive model in the latter 1950s. (Conant, 1959) These were among the concerns that inspired Conant to write *Slums and Suburbs*.

As the size of high schools grew, they inevitably included larger numbers of working class youth. This was a part of Conant's vision of a school that brought youth from various social classes and groups together. He believed that the high school should be a universal American institution, even though he did not feel everyone should study the same subjects. Statistical evidence points to the success of his arguments. As the number of adolescents grew in the fifties and sixties, high school enrollments climbed dramatically. As indicated in Table 2, this was a consequence both of the baby boom and improved rates of high school attendance. (West, 1996) By the end of the 1950's, more than eighty percent of American teenagers attended high school, making it virtually a universal experience for the first time in American history. (Angus and Mirel, 1999) This had a number of important consequences.

One was the fact that adolescents as a social group were segregated from the rest of society for a significant amount of time each week, through most of the year, in institutions where they constituted the vast majority of the population. Because of age grading, and the differentiated structure of most high schools, they did not even have systematic contact with youth in different age groups, such as young adults over 18 or 19. This contributed to the development of what James S. Coleman described as the "adolescent society" in this period, based largely in the American high school. (Coleman, 1961 and 1965) And this was an important component of

what many observers of American life at the time referred to as the "youth culture." (Cohen, 1997)

High schools were a critical component of the development of this phenomenon. Coleman argued that the social world of high school adolescence was defined by status groups associated with different sorts of school activities. In general, he found that athletics played an especially important role in the social life of high school students, especially boys. Academic performance was less important, although it may have gained significance as students progressed through school. (Coleman, 1961) Other studies examined the influence of the larger youth culture, which was commercially directed by record companies, the radio, television and print media, and a host of other enterprises. Adolescents had preferred distinctive forms of music for several decades, and dancing had been popular with the rise of dating as a distinctive teenage activity in the twenties and thirties. (Palladino, 1996)

In the 1950's new forms of teenage entertainment came into being, with the rapid rise of rock and roll music as a popular idiom. New dances came into play also, and youth culture became associated with a variety of new forms of consumption. Fast cars, cigarette smoking and alcohol, and the hint of sexual promiscuity came to represent the new youth culture, and to distinguish it from the clean-cut images of youth from earlier decades. Despite attempts at censorship, these images were spread through the media, including radio, the movies and the increasingly ubiquitous television. It is doubtful that any more than a minority of youth actually engaged in such activities routinely; but even for those who did not, the idea of rebellion against adult mores exerted a powerful appeal. (Gilbert, 1986) And it was an impulse that would exert even greater influence in the decades to follow.

If music and movies were important features of youth culture, clothing may have been even more important. High school students in earlier decades had dressed like miniature adults, with boys wearing coats and ties and girls dresses or skirts. As the number of students in school increased, standards of dress began to be challenged. As one study of students in Milwaukee found, by the latter fifties high school students there had shed coats, ties and dresses in favor of slacks, shirts and sweaters. (Haubrich, 1993) In the 1960's high school dress codes became a subject of student protests, and were eliminated in schools across the country. By the 1970's jeans and t-shirts were the norm in many schools, and adolescent tastes were becoming a major force in the world of adult fashion. (Palladino, 1996)

At about the same time there was a dramatic shift in sexual mores, with a corresponding change in teenage behavior. Rates of non-marital sex among teenagers increased signicantly in the early 1970's, jumping from less then twenty percent to more than a third. Sexuality became a prominent feature of popular culture, and a central aspect of the rapidly evolving high school-based adolescent society. By the latter 1970's there was a movement to make sex education a major element of the secondary curriculum. (Chilman, 1978; Esman, 1990; Palladino, 1996)

All of these trends in youth culture coincided with the movement to consolidate and expand high schools across the country, which Conant endorsed so enthusiastically. As indicated in Table 2, the average size of public high schools more than doubled between 1950 and 1970, and these figures understate the size of high schools most students attended in these years (due to the large

number of small rural districts with combined elementary-secondary schools). Ernest Boyer, writing in the early 1980s, put the number of high schools at only about 16000, which put the average enrollment at that point at nearly 900. (Boyer 1983) *High School and Beyond* data collected in the 1970s and eighties indicate that the typical public high school at that time had some 875 students, and more than 40 percent had above 900. (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993). It was the latter schools, of course, that enrolled the majority of the nation's high school students, and continue to do so today. These largest high schools have historically been concentrated in urban areas, but many suburban districts also established large secondary schools as their teenage populations expanded rapidly in the post-war years. For metropolitan youth, the institutional norm is a large, differentiated public high school. On the question of school size, Conant's arguments appear to have won the day.

Ironically, the development of larger high schools, with greater numbers of students and psychological distance between adolescents and adults, may have abetted the development of this school-based youth culture. Recent research has associated a loss of adult control in larger schools, and a reduction in the degree of personalism in contact between students and adults. A number of studies have argued that greater school size inhibits student learning, especially when it makes it difficult for adolescents and adults to communicate meaningfully. (Haller 1992; Sizer, 1996) This point was made emphatically by scholars comparing private—particularly Catholic—and public high schools. These authors reported that school size was a significant factor in accounting for the superior academic performance and school climate of private institutions. (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore, 1982). Bigger, it turned out, was not always better.

This seems to have been especially true in big cities, in schools with large minority student populations. (Meier, 1996; Lee and Smith, 1997), and it is also evident in suburban institutions. Pamela Bettis (1996) has described the lack of efficacy experienced by urban youth in large schools. Signiythia Fordham (1997) has suggested that large all-Black high schools engender a student culture of resistance to academic achievement; Paul Willis (1977) has observed a parallel subculture among working class youth in Great Britain. In her perceptive analysis of student cultures in a suburban setting, "Jocks and Burnouts," Penelope Eckert (1989) found a high level of disengagement among working class youth, for whom the school had come to represent a point of negative reference. The development of overt student cultures of "resistance" in such settings were observed to have been assisted by the very size of the schools. Indeed, Eckert has reported that opposition appeared to decline as the size of the school decreased (p. 98). Barker and Gump (1964), in their analysis of high school size in the 1960s, found that greater numbers of students were excluded from school activities in larger schools, a condition that contributed to more widespread alienation from the institution. There is considerable evidence, on the other hand, that smaller schools—again, especially Catholic schools that foster a clear sense of community—have greater success with urban students. (Greely, 1982) Conant's insistence on the need for larger schools, in that case, may have contributed to some of the most difficult problems faced by American secondary education in recent years. This was yet another irony of the comprehensive high school.

As Coleman and other observers have noted, youth culture often took the immediate community and its values as a point of departure. This accounted for the heavy value placed on athletics. (Coleman, 1961) But with the social and economic differentiation of the metropolitan landscape, this has resulted in a variegated adolescent culture, or—alternatively—a set of youth subcultures. (Coleman 1965) This can be seen nationally in the highly fragmented forms of youth culture that exist in the popular media. (Giroux, 1996) If these varied elements of adolescent society perform a major element of the socialization that occurs in the large, differentiated metropolitan high schools of the latter twentieth century, what has happened to Conant's vision of the high school as an agent of democratic socialization? This may be yet another aspect of how the "comprehensive" high school ideal that he represented has contributed to challenges facing secondary education as we approach a new century.

High Schools, Youth and the Changing Urban Economy

Another important facet of urban life that changed in the post war period was the youth labor market. Historically, most American youth started to work before age twenty, even if only on a part time basis. (Kett, 1977) Employment rates for high school aged youth contracted dramatically in the 1930's, however, as a consequence of the Great Depression. This ended during the Second World War, as demand for labor skyrocketed. By the Post-War period the job market for youth had been restored somewhat, but patterns of high school enrollment established during the depression also returned. (Angus and Mirel, 1999) Larger numbers of working class youth entered the high school at this time, posing a challenge to the integrating function of the comprehensive ideal.

The urban economy also changed profoundly in the decades following the Second World War. In the immediate post-war period, industrial jobs were plentiful, and it was the prospect of employment in the booming factories of the great Northern cities that drew African Americans out of the South in the 1950's. Despite periodic downturns, the urban-industrial economy was flush during the fifties, but already showed signs of change in the following decade. (Teaford, 1990) By the mid-sixties some observers already were warning that the demand for unskilled labor would be limited in the future, although their projections under estimated the rate of long-term change. (Havighurst, 1966; Harrison, 1972) No one, however, anticipated the shifting relationship of education and employment that characterized the closing decades of the century.

The very idea of the comprehensive high school, of course, was premised on the principle of differentiation: the notion that high school youth are destined to enter a variety of different occupational fields upon graduation. This was in large part a legacy of the Progressive era, and the social efficiency rationale for the vocational education movement. The Cardinal Principles held that the high school should be preparation for life, and vocational education advocates argued that there were many different roads that students may take in their working careers. This was certainly true in the 1920's, when a fraction of the high school aged population attended school, even in the cities. (Krug, 1972) And it continued to be true in the immediate post war period. Industrial employment remained quite robust, and even if many high school graduates did not find jobs as manual laborers, the rationale for vocational training was still rather clear.

(Coleman, 1965) As the urban economy changed, however, the relevance of vocational training weakened. And vocational education became supplanted with a variety of other curricular options, but particularly with the "general course." Some historians have referred to this as "warehousing." (Angus and Mirel, 1999)

Even if the sectoral distribution of employment did not change in the short term, the economy was evolving in new ways and demanding new skills of entry-level workers. Literacy requirements in the workplace were rising, especially in the sixties and seventies, at the same time that the academic quality of urban high schools began to falter. (Levine and Zipp, 1993; Ginzberg, 1975) This was a major element of the crisis of urban education that emerged in the 1970's and eighties. And it was linked to the rising national interest in education reflected in the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in the early eighties. In many cities concern was expressed by employers about the poor quality of inner city high schools, and the difficulties they faced in finding capable workers. Such questions became more commonplace in the latter 1980s, as employment opportunities in downtown offices expanded rapidly in connection with the burgeoning banking, financial services, and insurance industries. (Levine and Trachtman, 1988) It was the dawn of a new era.

These changes were tied to a set of larger shifts in the American economy which have received much attention in recent years. During the time Conant wrote *The American High School Today* more than a quarter of all U.S. workers were employed in manufacturing. When employees in industry were added to other sectors of the economy requiring similar skills, over forty percent of the labor force could be classified as "blue collar," both skilled and unskilled. Another thirty five percent were clerical workers, most of them employed in urban offices. On the other hand, managerial and professional employment accounted for less than a quarter of the nation's overall employment. (Long, 1958; Levy, 1987) Given this, it appeared quite reasonable for Conant and others to surmise that the majority of American youth would not require education beyond the secondary level. For these students, vocational or commercial training would be most appropriate. Only a minority of the "brightest" youth need be prepared for post-secondary education. (Conant, 1959, 1961)

The basic occupational structure of the American labor force changed slowly through the 1960's, with a gradual shift away from employment in manufacturing and greater numbers of workers in the "service sector." In 1970 more than a quarter of the nation's workers were employed in manufacturing, and the number of positions requiring higher education had changed relatively little. But the years which followed witnessed a dramatic transformation that continues to unfold today. Beginning in the 1970s, and accelerating in the decades which followed, the number of manufacturing jobs began to plummet. (Levy, 1987) Nation-wide, the proportion of the labor force employed in manufacturing fell from about a quarter to eighteen percent between 1970 and 1990. (Murphey and Welch, 1993) The impact of this was evident first in the cities, as noted above, but eventually affected all areas of the country. Economists speculate that it was due both to technological change and to the movement of jobs to other countries. (Abramovitz and David, 1996) And it was a set of changes which came to have important implications for schools. The number of jobs for which relatively little formal education was necessary had begun to contract.

Jobs in manufacturing were replaced by positions in offices, and by growth in management and technical and professional employment. This was slow to develop, but beginning in the 1980's a shift toward jobs requiring progressively higher levels of education had become evident. (Murphey and Welch, 1989; Cohn and Hughes, 1994) This was reflected in wage rates for workers with different levels of education. At the start of the seventies the hourly earnings for employees with less than a high school education and college graduates were about seven dollars apart, and high school graduates earned only about $ 1.50 more per hour than non-graduates. Because of the large cohort of college graduates produced in the sixties and seventies, the advantage of college actually shrank appreciably in the seventies, and in 1979 only about six dollars separated the hourly wages of high school dropouts and college graduates. But after that the gap began to widen, and by the mid 1990's college graduates earned nearly ten dollars more per hour than high school non-completers, and more than seven dollars per hour than high school graduates. (Datazone, 1999) In other words, the labor market began to pay even bigger returns to students who went to college.

This occurred because of two trends. First, dollar returns to college education increased slightly across the 1980's and 1990's, roughly seven percent. At the same time, however, the wages of high school dropouts fell by more than a quarter, and those of high school graduates declined by about eight percent. The impact on high school dropouts was particularly dramatic (Stern, et. al., 1989) Thus, by the 1990's, the earnings premium for attending college was greater than at any time in the post war period. This, not surprisingly, helped to spur a corresponding jump in college enrollments. Beginning in the mid 1980's, ever larger numbers of American high school graduates entered college. In the early 1980's less than half of high school seniors continued on to college; by the latter 1990's the figure approached seventy percent. (Murphey and Welch, 1993) These, of course, were rational decisions, given the decline of employment opportunities for students without higher education, and the growing wage differentials. By 1990 it was calculated that a college degree was, on average, worth half a million dollars more than a high school diploma in life-time earnings. Figures such as these helped to make the idea of attending college attractive to a much broader range of American youth than had been the case just two decades earlier. (Hunt, 1995)

A dramatic rise in female labor force participation in the 1970s and eighties also contributed to this general trend. Among the most rapidly growing areas of female employment were the professions, and in other jobs requiring some measure of higher education. Consequently, female enrollments in college climbed dramatically, particularly in the eighties and nineties. This was the case despite a lower responsiveness in female enrollments to wage dividends for college. (Averett and Burton, 1996) As indicated in Table 3, by the final decade of the century, women substantially outnumbered men among undergraduates for the first time in American history. This contributed to the rapid rise in the number of high school graduates continuing on to college in the nineties, indeed the rate of college entry among women was about ten percent greater than among men.

Across the country educational expectations were rising in the latter twentieth century. In an analysis of white high school graduates in 1960 and 1980, Marlis Buchmann found that students'

expectations of the highest degree they would earn changed significantly between these two cohorts. Altogether, the number expecting to simply end their education at high school fell from more than a quarter to just eighteen percent, almost a thirty percent drop. At the same time, those expecting to earn graduate or advanced professional degrees increased from about twelve to over 21 percent. (Buchman, 1989) These trends would only accelerate in the years to follow.

Such changes in students' educational plans can be interpreted as a rational response to the changing job market. As Buchmann and a number of other observers have noted, the earning power of high school diplomas faded in the 1980's, at the same time that returns to college education began to increase significantly. This was partly due to shifts in the occupational structure, with the decline in manufacturing employment. But it was also due to the growing preference of employers to hire workers—especially beginning employees—with higher levels of education. (Carnevale and Desrochers, 1997) In a careful analysis of BLS data, Kevin Murphy and Finis Welch have argued that employment of workers with college education increased in all industrial sectors in the 1980s, contributing to a broad rising demand for higher levels of educational attainment. These changes helped to fuel a continuing expansion of the higher education sector, despite smaller numbers of high school graduates, through the latter 1980's and early nineties. (Murphey and Welch, 1993) By the middle of the 1990's, a majority of high school graduates across the country were continuing on to some form or another of higher education. This is evident in figures reported in Table 3.

With these dramatic shifts in the national economy, the stakes of educational decisions made by teenagers became quite high. Christopher Jencks other social scientists recently have found that future earning were tied to skill levels measured by tests for cohorts born in the 1960's and 1970's, just when schools appear to have failed in large measure to effectively transmit the requisite skills. For students who did not develop their academic skills in high school, and who chose not to continue on to some form of higher education, real wages declined in the decades following 1979. Given this, it is little wonder that enrollments in academic courses increased in this period. It was a rational response to the development of a new economic reality in metropolitan America. (Jencks, 1998)

The changing economy helped to underscore the importance of educational differences between inner city and suburban communities. While the latter kept pace with the new expectations of the economy, the former fell farther behind. (Harrison, 1972; Sexton and Nickel, 1992) For inner city neighborhoods, and the students who live in them, the prospect of vocational education providing a means of economic development has faded. This was evident as early as the late seventies, and was reported in the Boyer report in 1983. (Boyer, 1983) Today it is reflected somewhat in the improved rates of college enrollment for African Americans reported in Table 4, but post-secondary participation rates for Hispanic students has lagged behind the advance of other groups in the past two decades. As the new service economy continues to develop in the years ahead, these patterns of educational differentiation could pose a significant problem.

Part of the problem with vocational education has been the rapid pace of change in the economy. This was a theme in Boyer's study of secondary education. (Boyer 1983) In a more recent analysis of secondary vocational programs, John Bishop (1989) has argued that occupational

education is least effective when it is not matched to existing jobs. As the number of central city manufacturing jobs fell, they were replaced by service positions, many of which required at least a high school diploma and a broad range of academic skills. And as the technical requirements of office jobs increased, many employers in the cities began to look for even higher educational credentials. One estimate suggests that as many as 52 percent of future jobs in metropolitan areas will require at least some college preparation. (Dougherty, 1997) Youth without this background will clearly be at a disadvantage.

The emphasis today, as never before in recent history, is on academic skills, and this is evident in the behavior of employers. (Stern, et. al., 1989; Sexton and Nickol, 1992; Wilson, 1995) The growing educational mismatch between the expectations of downtown employers and the preparation of city high school students was a major impetus behind urban school reform campaigns of the last decade. In Chicago it has led to Mayor Richard M. Daley assuming control of the public schools and instituting a series of changes aimed at restoring the public image of the schools and raising test scores. (Wong, et. al., 1997; Shipps, 1998) Other cities are considering similar interventions, even though it is not clear that long term gains in academic achievement will result from such a reform strategy. (Chicago Tribune, 1999) The fates of hundreds of thousands of poor and minority central city youth hang in the balance.

Conant and other advocates of the comprehensive high school believed that the allocation of students to various types of curricula would correspond to the demand for various skills in the labor market. The historical development of the economy and recent changes in high school enrollments have proven this view to be correct in certain respects. The picture that has emerged in the past fifteen years, however, is quite different from the one Conant had envisioned in the latter fifties. In response to the controversies of the early 1980s, and particularly publication of *A Nation at Risk*, academic requirements for graduation have been raised for the majority of high school students, and vocational curricula serve a shrinking minority. Studies of Catholic high schools have argued that their success has been partly due to their generally undifferentiated academic curriculum. (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993) Critics of the high school today argue that all students should be provided with a rigorous academic curriculum if they are to succeed in the economy of the future. (Angus and Mirel, 1999) If that vision comes to pass, it is a legitimate question whether the comprehensive high school envisioned by Conant would be necessary at all.

Conclusion

A number of historical developments converged in the decades following the Second World War to make James Conant's vision of the high school problematic, at least in the nation's large metropolitan areas. Racial segregation and the movement of Southern Blacks to Northern cities divided urban and suburban school districts, creating sharp disparities in educational resource allocation and curricular orientation. Where Conant had imagined the comprehensive high school as an instrument of democratic socialization, by the 1970's it had evolved into an agency of racial isolation and alienation. Rather than bringing students from the nation's principal social/ethnic groups together, in many respects high schools helped to highlight their differences. This process was rooted in patterns of residential segregation, of course, but was abetted by the

emergence of a youth culture that also became fragmented along racial lines with time. Conant's insistence on the importance of large schools may have helped to compromise adult authority in the face of the growing influence of the youth culture. The relaxation of rules and changing standards of conduct helped make the schools into centers of an elaborate social world for adolescent youth, diverting energy and enthusiasm for academic interests. Even if Conant was not a proponent of many of the reforms in student life, his campaign for larger school helped to set the stage for other developments in the development of a school-based "adolescent society" in the post-war period.

Finally, changes in the economy altered the very premise of a differentiated curriculum for the high school. Conant already had noted the heavily academic orientation of suburban high schools in the 1960's. In the 1980's this tendency became even more pronounced, as ever larger numbers of high school graduates entered college of one sort or another. The rationale for vocational education became weaker as the manufacturing sector of the economy stagnated or even disappeared, as it had in many larger cities by the 1980s. By the last decade of the century, high schools across the country were offering stronger academic programs to all students. In the face of significant change in the economy, and the rapidly rising value of academic skills, the academic curriculum was not suitable for only the most gifted students. The old comprehensive high school has been acquiring an increasingly academic demeanor.

At the end of the twentieth century few observers discuss the high school as an instrument for bringing students from different backgrounds together. Smaller schools are being urged to give adults greater authority and diminish the influence of the youth culture, in all of its varied manifestations; and the differentiated curriculum is giving way to a greater interest in academic preparation, driven in large part by changes in the economy and public perceptions about the importance of education, especially at the post-secondary level. Given this, it may be the case that the age of the comprehensive high school is drawing to a close. James Conant, it seems, was wrong about the development of secondary education in the decades following publication of *The American High School Today*.

But observations such as these leave a number of questions unanswered. What is the best institutional arrangement for the great variety of American youth to be educated in the coming century? Surely there will be a need for some occupational training, even if secondary education becomes more uniformly academic in orientation. Charles Benson (1997) has written about a "new vocationalism" that integrates academic and occupational curricula, and combines schoolwork with work-based learning, overcoming the disjunctures that often exist between schools and the labor market. Other observers suggest that intermediate post-secondary institutions, particularly community colleges, have a vital role to play in linking metropolitan youth to the rapidly changing job market. (Grubb, 1995) Whatever the accommodations to the labor force, however, there is also the question of the high school's role in contributing to the democratic ethos of American society. At the same time that the institution's role in curricular differentiation seems to have diminished somewhat, its role in augmenting social and cultural distinctions in society appears to have grown larger. If James Conant were alive today, I am certain he would find this a most troubling development. And it is difficult to see how anyone

who is concerned with the long-term development of American civilization could disagree.

Table 1: Socioeconomic area and pupil achievement in Chicago high schools, 1963

School number	*SER*	*Achievement*	*Low reading level*	*Say will enter college*	*% Black*
1	290	52	0	94	0
2	229	49	0	88	0
3	199	54	0	91	0
4	180	54	0	81	2
5	123	40	12	71	26
6	109	47	0	67	0
7	97	36	0	74	0
8	83	32	0	57	0
9	82	29	22	55	21
10	82	29	12	55	0
11	79	36	5	74	0
12	75	27	5	57	0
13	74	41	0	49	0
14	69	32	0	52	0
15	68	33	14	52	0
16	68	25	23	73	87
17	66	28	4	48	0
18	61	32	8	46	3
19	54	11	16	46	28
20	54	43	0	70	3
21	53	21	15	76	88
22	53	26	0	39	11
23	53	25	12	42	19
24	52	17	15	78	98
25	50	23	0	41	0
26	49	23	0	44	0
27	39	22	4	38	1
28	34	16	13	35	1
29	27	27	0	44	0
30	24	8	29	53	100
31	23	11	16	36	9
32	22	10	41	65	100
33	22	4	56	53	94
34	20	10	46	65	80
35	20	14	29	39	44
36	19	8	36	61	99
37	17	4	37	51	91
38	14	4	42	53	100
39	11	6	41	53	100

Table 1 notes: SER refers to the socio-economic level of the surrounding community. It reflects the ratio of professional and white collar employment to blue collar employment and unemployed persons. A score above 100, in that case, indicates a community with a preponderance of white collar employment. The lower the score, the lower the occupational status of the surrounding community. The order of the schools in the table is dictated by SER scores. See Havighust, The Public Schools of Chicago, Appendix 1 for details.

Achievement is the percentage of 9th and 11th grade students in the top three stanines of a nationally normed reading test. Across the city, some 23 percent of such students scored in the top three stanines.

Low Reading Level represents the proportion of the school's ninth grade English classes labeled "Basic English," which generally served as remedial instruction for students who read at the sixth grade level or lower.

Table 2: High School Enrollments and School Size, 1930-1990

Year	Population 5 to 17	High School Enrollments	Pcnt HiSch	Number of High Schls	Avg Size
1930	31414	4399	17%	23930	166
1940	30151	6601	26%	25000*	237
1950	30223	5725	22%	24542	210
1960	43881	8485	23%	25764	295
1970	52386	13073	29%	25352	463
1980	48041	13616	33%	24362	504
1990	44947	11390	28%	22639	453

Table 2 Notes: Population and enrollment figures in thousands. Percent high school column is percent of K-12 population enrolled in high school. Number of high schools indicates public high schools; size estimates based on 90% of total high school enrollments. 1940 number of high schools is an estimate based on earlier and later years.

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics. Digest of Educational Statistics 1995. U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 95-029. Tables 38 and 88.

Table 3: Male and Female College Enrollment Rates, 1960-1994 (percent HS graduates enrolling within 1 year)

Year	Total	Male	Female
1960	45.1	54	37.9
1970	51.8	55.2	48.5
1980	49.3	46.7	51.8
1990	59.9	57.8	62
1994	61.9	60.6	63.2

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics. Digest of Educational Statistics 1995. U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 95-029. Table 178.

Table 4: College Enrollment Rates for Major Ethnic Groups, 1967-1993 (total enrollments as percentage of 18-24 population)

Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
1967	25.5	26.9	13	-------
1972	25.5	27.2	18.3	13.4
1980	25.7	27.3	19.4	16.1
1990	32.1	35.2	25.3	16.2
1993	34.6	38.1	27.7	18.8

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics. Digest of Educational Statistics 1995. U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 95-029. Table 180.

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